

SYSTEM PARTNER COLLECTIVE EVALUATION AND LEARNING

Case study

British Judo Association

February 2026

Case study overview

British Judo Association (BJA) is the National Governing Body (NGB) for Judo in the UK, providing strategic direction, judo expertise, and coach education. Building on academic research led by Professor Mike Callan at the University of Hertfordshire, BJA and partners have developed “Finding Your Feet”, a judo-based programme that teaches older adults to fall more safely, improve balance and build confidence.

This case study explores how BJA, universities, local clubs, Active Partnerships and health partners are working together to grow this innovative health offer, and what this reveals about NGBs’ role in tackling health inequalities.

- **Why collaborate?** Collaboration is driven by a shared belief in judo’s wider social value, a common focus on older adults and people living with frailty and practical needs around reach, credibility and funding. Partners bring complementary expertise – from academic research and judo practice to community outreach and health system links.
- **How do they collaborate?** BJA provides strategic leadership and a programme model; universities underpin credibility and evaluation; local clubs and coaches deliver sessions; Active Partnerships and local authorities broker local funding and connections; and health partners, care settings and community groups act as referral routes and hosts.
- **What is the impact?** Early evidence shows increased confidence, reduced anxiety about falling, improved preparedness when falls occur, and stronger social connections among older adults and people with Parkinson’s. The programme has also shifted BJA’s strategy towards “more than medals” and built new relationships across the health and care system.
- **What is Sport England’s influence?** System partner investment has enabled BJA to invest staff time in developing and leading the programme. The strategic steer of Uniting the Movement has legitimised a focus on older adults, health and wellbeing, although partners felt that they would have needed access to additional funding, available on an ad-hoc basis, to roll out the programme further.
- **Key learnings?** The British Judo experience highlights the importance of combining academic evidence and media visibility to build credibility; working through both national and local relationships to reach older adults; and aligning funding, workforce development and health partners’ buy-in to scale innovative offers.

About the partners

- **British Judo Association** is the NGB for judo, providing strategic direction, technical expertise and coach education. It has led the development of Finding Your Feet, building on academic research and working with a network of partners to test and adapt the programme for older adults and people living with long term conditions, such as Parkinson's.
- **Academic partners.** Professor Mike Callan at the University of Hertfordshire (UoH) initiated the safer falling work, drawing on international evidence and judo practice. Professor Callan and Dr Katrina McDonald at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) supported the BJA in the development of the coach programme. UoH, ARU and the University of Wolverhampton have helped to develop the evidence base, adapt the programme for specific groups (including people living with Parkinson's), and support evaluation and student placements.
- **Judo Scotland and local judo clubs and coaches across England** have been key delivery partners. They have acted as early adopters, delivering pilots and adapting coaching approaches for older adults and clinical populations. Coaches are central to the model, using judo principles to teach safe falling, balance and confidence in community and care settings.
- **Active Partnerships** such as Herts Sport and Physical Activity Partnership, Active Cumbria and Active Essex, together with local authorities including Cumbria and North Northamptonshire, have brokered connections, secured local funding and aligned Finding Your Feet with wider healthy ageing and frailty priorities.
- **Health and community partners** extend the programme's reach into everyday settings. Through their networks across care homes, GP surgeries, Primary Care Networks (PCNs), Integrated Care Boards (ICBs), Age UK and local groups such as U3A, Parkinson's groups and older people's clubs, they have created referral pathways and directly engaged target audiences. Together, these partners form a collaborative network around BJA that enables the programme to reach those most likely to benefit.

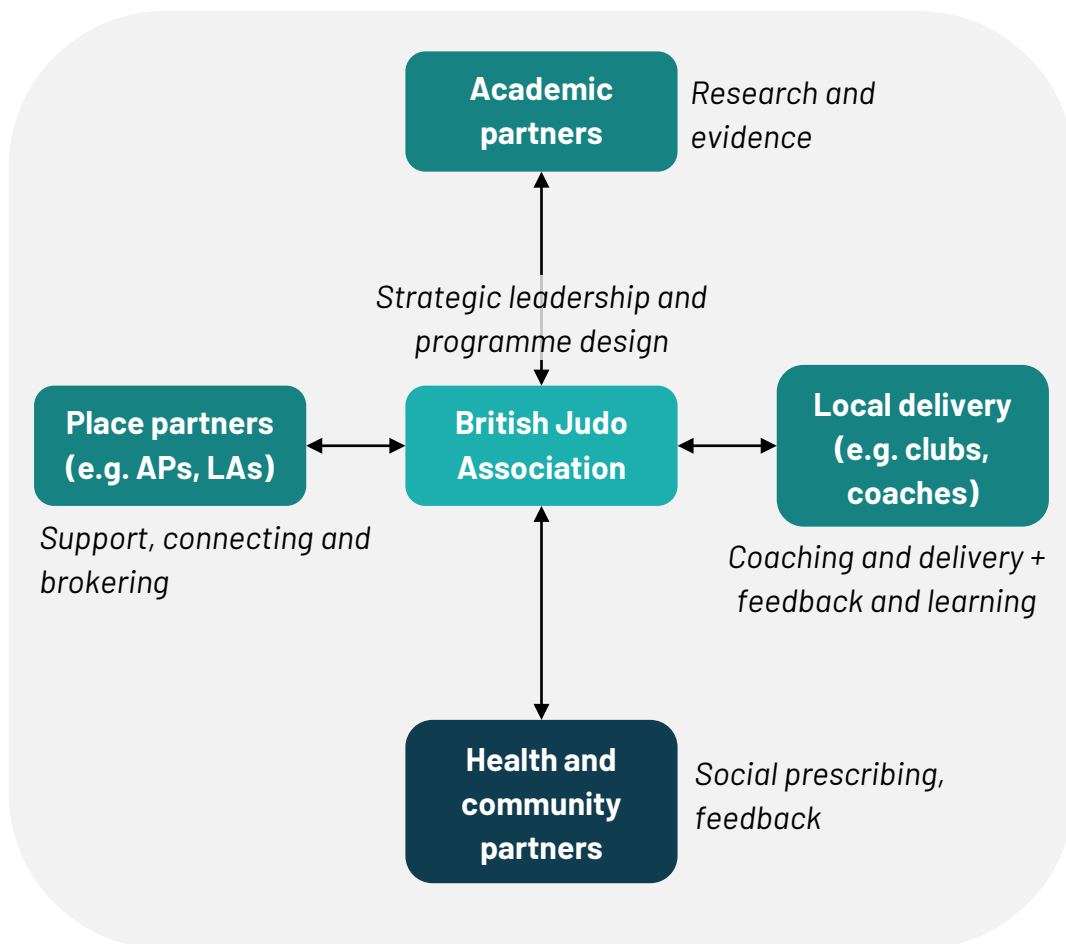
Why collaborate?

Collaboration is driven by shared beliefs about judo's social value, a common focus on older adults and frailty, and practical requirements to reach participants, secure funding and build credibility.

- **Shared belief in the positive benefits of Judo:** For BJA, clubs and coaches, judo's philosophy, particularly "mutual welfare and benefit", creates a strong motivation to use the sport to "benefit society", not only to win medals. Safe falling techniques are core to judo practice and can be repurposed to help older adults reduce the impact of inevitable falls. Local authority and Active Partnership partners see the programme as strongly aligned with "live longer better" approaches and frailty priorities within ICBs and Integrated Neighbourhood Teams (INTs).
- **Reach older adults and clinical populations:** Traditional judo structures reach children and younger adults through clubs and schools, but not older people. Partnerships with local authorities, PCNs, Age UK, care homes and community groups provide access to older adults, people with Parkinson's and others living with frailty, and help generate a steady flow of participants via social prescribing and older adults' networks.
- **Funding and resources:** BJA can provide a national framework and coach education, but local delivery requires funding for coach time, facilities, equipment and support for participants to attend. Active Partnerships, local authorities and other funders have been critical in resourcing pilots – for example, three-year funding for the Harlow project through Active Essex.
- **Complementary expertise and credibility:** The partnership model brings together judo knowledge, community development and academic research. As one partner put it, "our area of expertise is community connection – it's not the mechanics of judo". Academic partners and media coverage help provide the evidence and credibility needed to persuade cautious health commissioners and clinical professionals.
- **Establishing the evidence base:** The collaboration between practitioners and academics allows for the creation of a credible evidence base, which is important for securing buy-in from the health sector.

How do partners collaborate?

Partners collaborate through a mix of national leadership and local, relationship-based working, underpinned by shared learning and evidence.



- **Strategic leadership and programme design:** BJA provides overall strategic direction, develops the Finding Your Feet curriculum and coach training, and uses its national network to promote the offer. Partners stressed that this leadership has been essential in turning early research into a tangible "product" that clubs and external partners can understand and adopt.
- **Local relationships and grassroots growth:** The programme has spread largely through informal connections and local champions. A judo coach based in a community centre has linked with other older-people's groups in the same building; a care home provider became involved after attending a local demonstration; and a Primary Care Network invited a judo coach to a health day having first seen a taster session elsewhere. This pattern reflects an asset-based, "go where the energy is" approach, with locally trusted organisations and individuals driving uptake.
- **Joint development and 'test and learn':** Early pilots, including work with people with Parkinson's at the University of Wolverhampton, have used a test-and-learn approach to refine session formats (e.g. 60 minutes of activity plus 60 minutes of social time), adapt judo techniques for different needs, and develop appropriate workforce pathways. Academics and practitioners co-produce adjustments, and insights are shared through workshops, reports and peer learning sessions.
- **Sharing evidence, stories and tools:** Partners actively share case studies, media coverage (e.g. BBC and ITV Midlands features), and practical resources (videos, leaflets for fracture clinics and PCNs) to build awareness and support. This helps new areas get started more quickly and supports conversations with health professionals and commissioners.

What has worked well in terms of collaboration?

Partners highlighted several factors that have enabled effective collaboration, including a clear shared goal, the strength of the judo community, strategic leadership from BJA, and added credibility through academic evidence and mainstream media coverage.

- **A clear, shared goal:** Partners are united around a practical goal: enabling older adults and people living with long term conditions, such as Parkinson's, to fall more safely. Motivations differ, from widening judo's reach, to improving population health, to generating academic impact, but this shared outcome has kept collaboration focused and constructive.
- **The strength of the 'judo family':** A strong sense of identity and mutual support within judo has enabled coaches, clubs and Judo Scotland to engage enthusiastically with an unfamiliar audience. Coaches described the work with older adults as "life-changing" and felt proud that judo is "more than medals".
- **Strategic direction from BJA:** BJA's decision to prioritise Finding Your Feet and invest staff time in it has provided a clear framework and legitimacy for partners: "without British Judo we wouldn't all be here". This has helped shift the narrative within the judo community towards contribution to health and community wellbeing.
- **Visibility and credibility through media and academia:** Mainstream coverage on BBC and ITV Midlands, combined with academic research and evaluation, has been described as a "game changer". It has increased demand from participants, provided reassurance to health professionals, and strengthened the case for local funding and referrals.

What has worked less well in terms of collaboration?

Collaboration has also faced challenges, particularly around inconsistent and inflexible funding, limited and under-used coaching capacity, risk-averse and fragmented health referral pathways, and an ad-hoc, relationship-dependent approach to scaling the programme.

- **Access to delivery funding:** Local BJA partners described delivery funding as largely project-by-project, coming from a mix of local authority grants, Active Partnership budgets (often drawing on Sport England place-based investment) and occasional NHS or charitable support. Three-year investment secured locally in Harlow by Active Essex, using Sport England resources, has enabled deep work there, but there is no consistent national pot to support roll-out in other areas. Sport England's System Partner funding has resourced BJA's programme leadership but cannot be used for local delivery, and partners felt that they would have needed access to additional funding, available on an ad-hoc basis, to extend the programme further when early pilots showed promise. Accessing NHS prevention budgets has also been difficult, despite the potential cost savings from avoided hospital admissions.
- **Limited and under-utilised coaching capacity:** Around 250 coaches have been trained to deliver Finding Your Feet, but only about one in five are currently running sessions. Barriers include coaches' confidence in working with older or clinical populations, availability and cost of venues, time pressures, and requirements that coaches have a certain level of judo experience – which limits the potential workforce.
- **Risk aversion and fragmented health referrals:** Although individual physiotherapists and occupational therapists are often enthusiastic, partners report that NHS organisations can be risk-averse, preferring familiar, accredited falls prevention offers. Referral routes via councils and health systems are patchy, and perceptions of judo as a high-impact, competitive sport can be a barrier. This makes it hard to secure consistent referrals from GP practices, hospital teams and fracture clinics.
- **Ad-hoc approach to scaling:** Growth has relied heavily on personal relationships, local champions and repeated "sales pitches" to each new area or Active Partnership. While this has generated strong local ownership, partners recognise that it is time-consuming and uneven, and that a more coordinated national approach would help spread learning and avoid duplication.

What has changed, as a result of collaboration?

Collaboration around Finding Your Feet has led to tangible benefits for participants, coaches and the wider judo system, including increased confidence and preparedness among older adults, new coaching skills and roles, and a strategic shift within BJA towards health and community impact.

- **For participants:** coaches and attendees describe “life-changing” benefits, including reduced fear and anxiety about falling, increased confidence and mobility, feeling “more prepared and robust” in daily life, and stronger social connections and reduced loneliness through group sessions and social time. One participant with Parkinson’s reported tripping and starting to fall face-down but instinctively using their “judo response” and walking away without injury.
- **For coaches and clubs:** Working with older adults and people with long term conditions such as Parkinson’s has expanded coaches’ skills and confidence: “it’s a coaching skill that I never had at all – a totally different mindset”. Coaches report that techniques learned with older adults transfer to work with people with disabilities and other groups, strengthening their overall practice and sense of purpose.
- **For the BJA:** The collaboration has created a clear programme and resource set where three years ago “there was no product” and has helped shift BJA’s strategy and the wider judo community towards a stronger focus on health, community benefit and “more than medals”. It has also deepened relationships with Active Partnerships, universities and health partners, positioning judo as a credible contributor to wider health and social outcomes.

What has Sport England's influence been?

Sport England's influence has been felt primarily through the strategic steer of Uniting the Movement and System Partner funding for programme leadership, but limited access to flexible delivery funding and the absence of formal national endorsement have constrained the pace and scale of roll-out.

- **Strategic alignment through Uniting the Movement:** Partners highlighted the importance of Uniting the Movement's focus on tackling inequalities, healthy ageing and the role of sport in health and wellbeing. This has legitimised BJA's shift away from a sole focus on young competitors and performance outcomes and supported a stronger emphasis on older adults and other groups who may benefit from learning how to fall safely (e.g. disabled people, people with health conditions).
- **Resourcing programme leadership, not delivery:** System Partner funding has enabled BJA to invest staff time in developing and leading Finding Your Feet, building relationships with partners and supporting coach training. However, this funding does not cover local delivery costs. Partners contrasted this "people and system" funding with the "doing money" needed to pay for sessions, venues and equipment – and noted that both are necessary to scale impact.
- **Funding processes and innovation:** The current funding cycle structure limited BJA's ability to apply for Sport England delivery funding when early evidence emerged. Partners felt that more agile processes, allowing bids mid-cycle where programmes show promise, would better support innovation.
- **National credibility and cross-government influence:** The programme has been developed without formal national endorsement from Sport England. Partners felt that such endorsement, alongside stronger join-up between the sport and health sectors, could "open doors" with NHS bodies and social care commissioners, helping to mainstream sport-based contributions to falls and frailty agendas.

Key learning

The Finding Your Feet' or 'The British Judo' collaboration offers transferable learning for other places and System Partners seeking to tackle inequalities through sport.

For others (NGBs, Active Partnerships, health and community partners):

- **Build the socio-economic case:** Develop clear, quantified narratives about cost savings to the NHS and social care (e.g. the estimated £40k cost of a serious fall leading to a 10-day hospital stay), alongside qualitative stories, to support investment in prevention.
- **Frame the offer in health-system language:** Distinguish judo-based safer falling from traditional “falls prevention” classes, highlighting its role in helping people cope with inevitable falls, maintain confidence and independence, and complement strength and balance work.
- **Invest in evidence, case studies and storytelling:** Continue to capture data on attendance, confidence, wellbeing and real-world falls, and to produce case studies and short videos featuring participants and coaches. These are vital for building trust, attracting referrals and helping new areas adopt the programme quickly.
- **Address workforce barriers proactively:** Explore why trained coaches are not delivering sessions – for example, mentoring, simplified delivery models, support with venues and scheduling, and, where safe and appropriate, pathways for non-judo professionals (such as physiotherapists or exercise professionals) to deliver elements of the programme.

For Sport England:

- **Adopt more agile delivery funding approaches:** Consider mechanisms that allow System Partners to access delivery funding mid-cycle where innovative programmes show emerging impact, so that promising ideas are not stalled by set timelines.
- **Explore national endorsement and accreditation:** Assess whether a Sport England endorsement or quality mark for evidence-based, health-aligned programmes could help open doors with NHS and social care partners, and provide assurance about safety and quality.

